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Testudo atlas Barton, 1806, a long-forgotten synonym of the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and a senior secondary homonym of the largest tortoise that ever lived

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Johann Abraham Albers (1772–1821; Fig. 1) was a German physician and anatomist who was trained in Jena (M.D. 1795), Göttingen, Marburg, Vienna, London and Edinburgh, but returned to his natal Bremen in 1798, where he remained for the remainder of his life (Bynum 1968). In addition to his own research, Albers was active in translating and facilitating the translation of foreign medical works into German. In the short-lived periodical he edited, *Americanische Annalen der Arzneykunde, Naturgeschichte, Chemie und Physik* (1802–1803) Albers specifically reviewed for the German audience the medical and scientific works that were being produced in America. At a time when American science was generally held in low regard by the scientific and medical establishments in Europe, and nearly all American physicians were still being trained in Europe, Albers saw and appreciated the promise of American science (Bynum 1968). Among the numerous articles and books reviewed by Albers were two by the noted American naturalist and physician Benjamin Smith Barton (1766–1815; Fig. 2): *Fragments of the Natural History of Pennsylvania* (1799, reviewed in the *Annalen*, vol. 1:7–15) and *Collections for an Essay Towards a Materia Medica of the United States* (1801, reviewed in vol. 2:10–30).

Benjamin Smith Barton was based in Philadelphia, the cultural and intellectual hub of the United States at the turn of the 19th century. Although he was plagued by unfinished projects, chronic debt, and was considered by some ambitious, untalented and unqualified (e.g., he never received the medical degree he claimed to have; Graustein 1961, Tanner-Read 2012), Barton nonetheless achieved success and renown, holding positions of prestige and respect in institutions and societies in the United States and enjoying a positive reputation in Europe (Pennel 1942; Ewan and Ewan 2007), where he had established a network of correspondents (Barton 1836; Messer 2022), J.A. Albers being one of these.

Barton was prolific, writing on medical topics and ethnography as well as natural history. In the field of herpetology his main contributions were on salamanders, rattlesnakes, and the alligator (see Pennell 1942 and Adler 2007 for summaries of these major works). Many of his papers were addressed to European colleagues and published in the form of letters to particular scientists. For example, his monograph on *Siren* (Barton 1808) was addressed to the philologist Johann Gottlob Schneider (1750–1822), although it was apparently never sent to him (Ewan and Ewan 2007). However, beyond his more noteworthy contributions on amphibians and reptiles, Barton also published smaller notes, largely unnoticed by later workers, some of which proposed new names. For example, Barton (1807) erected three new

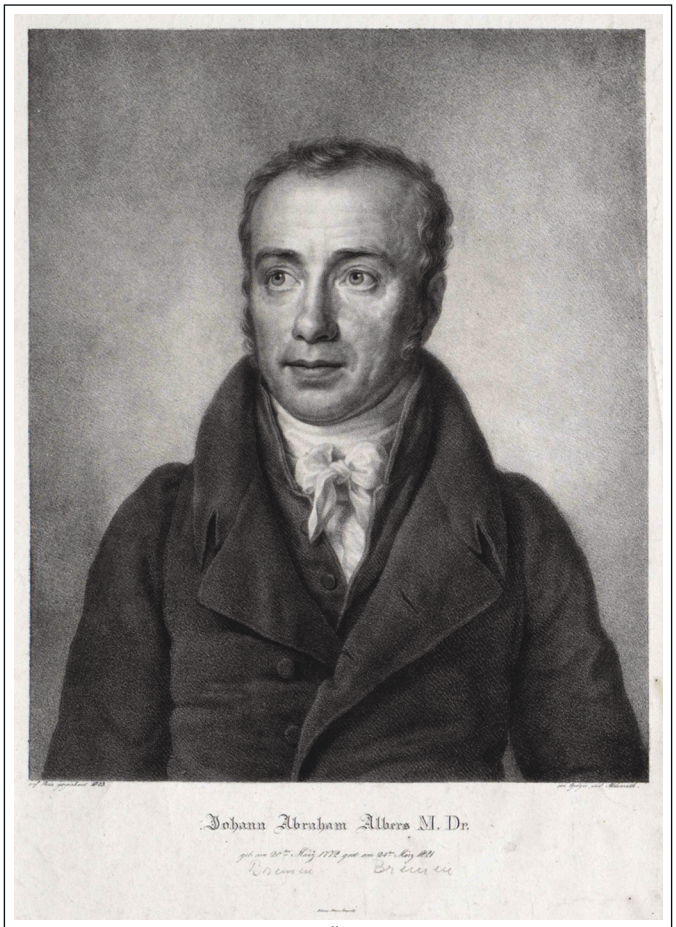

Fig. 1. Johann Abraham Albers. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – Austrian National Library (Public Domain Mark 1.0).

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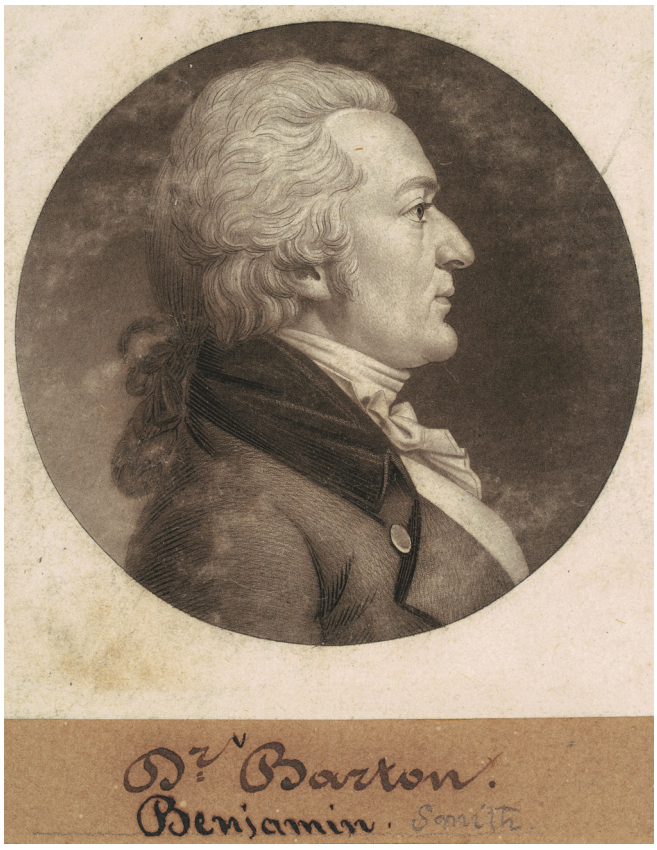


Fig. 2. Portrait (mezzotint and engraving) of Benjamin Smith Barton (1802) by Charles B.J. Févret de Saint-Mémin (1770–1852). Accession number 2015.19.1584.24.8, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Open Access under Creative Commons Zero). William Paul Crillon Barton (1836), nephew of B.S. Barton, identified this portrait as the most accurate likeness of his uncle, who was 36 at the time of the sitting.

names for species of *Cryptobranchus* in *The Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal*, a periodical that he founded and edited. This paper had apparently been cited only once until it was rediscovered recently by Frétey and Raffaëlli (2021). I here provide a brief discussion of another Barton herpetological contribution, the description of a tortoise, that seems to have escaped detection for more than 200 years.

In a letter to "Doctor Albers" in Bremen, published in the *Magazin für den neuesten Zustand der Naturkunde* 12 (5) of November 1806 (Fig. 3) and presumably translated into German by its editor, Johann Heinrich Voigt (1751–1823) or perhaps by Albers himself, Barton mentioned, among other things, a new chelonian that he intended to describe.

> "Noch besitze ich eine sehr merkwürdige Species von Schildkröten, die sich sehr wohl befindet und ein Bewohner von Georgia und Florida ist. Ich finde sie noch von keinem systematischen Naturforscher beschrieben, doch finden Sie einige Nachrichten davon in der Reisebeschreibung meines Freundes Bartram. In der Beschreibung, die ich davon mittheilen will, werde ich sie vielleicht *Testudo atlas* nennen, und zwar wegen ihrer außerordentlichen Stärke, besonders im Tragen großer Gewichte auf ihrem Rücken. Ein solches zwölf bis funfzehn Pfund schweres Thier kann einen mittelmäßig starken Mann eine ziemliche Strecke auf seinem Rücken forttragen."
>
> Further, I possess a very remarkable species of tortoise, which is in very good health, and is an inhabitant of Georgia and Florida. I have not yet found it described by any systematic naturalist, but you will find some information about it in my friend Bartram's account of his travels. In the description I shall give of it I shall perhaps call it *Testudo atlas*, from its extraordinary strength, especially in carrying great weights on its back. Such an animal, weighing from twelve to fifteen pounds, can carry a moderately strong man a considerable distance on its back [translation by AMB].

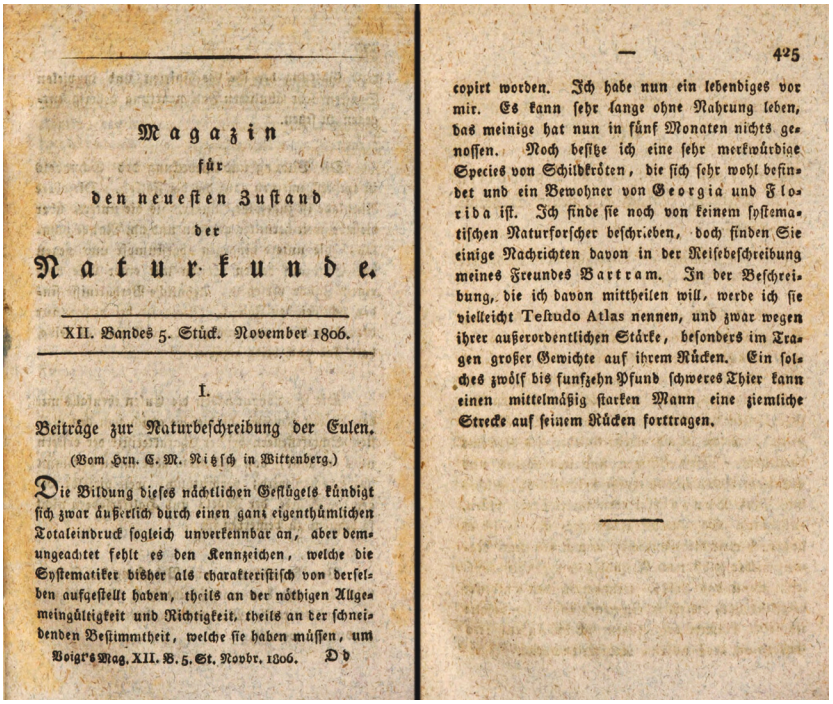
As the only tortoise occurring in Georgia and Florida, the taxon in question is clearly referable to the species currently recognized as *Gopherus polyphemus* (Daudin, 1801) (Fig. 4). Barton, whose letter to Albers was dated 7 January 1806, was apparently unaware of Daudin's description, which was also based on information derived from William Bartram's (1739–1823) *Travels* through southeastern British North America (including the "Indian Reserve"). Likewise, he either did not notice, or forgot, that Bartram (1791:18) in his *Travels* had applied the binomen *Testudo polyphaemus*[1] to the tortoise in a footnote, or perhaps he did not consider that Bartram had intended to coin a new name by this usage. Alternatively, he may simply wanted to avoid giving credit in order to promote himself, a well-known characteristic of Barton's personality (Harper 1952; Graustein 1961).

The text accompanying Bartram's (1791) initial proposal of the name *Testudo polyphaemus* is brief: "The dens, or caverns, dug in the sand-hills by the great land-tortoise, called here Gopher* [in footnote: * *Testudo polyphaemus*], present a very singular appearance: these vast caves are their castles and diurnal retreats, from which they issue forth in the night, in search of prey. The little mounds, or hillocks of fresh earth, thrown up in great numbers in the night, have also a curious appearance." However, later in the *Travels* he provides a much more extensive discussion of the same animal, including an detailed (for the time) description of the tortoise and its natural history:

> "[p. 182] Observed as we passed over the sand hills, the dens of the great land tortoise, called gopher : this

[1] Although nearly identical in content and layout to the 1791 Philadelphia first edition, the London and Dublin editions of 1792 used the spelling *Testudo polyphemus*, as did subsequent editions and translations. The work of Bartram was likely known to Albers through its German translation (Bartram 1793).

strange creature remains yet undescribed by historians and travellers. The first signs of this animal's existence, as we travel Southerly, are immediately after we cross the Savanna River. They are to be seen only on the high dry sand hills. When arrived at its greatest magnitude, the upper shell is near eighteen inches in length, and ten or twelve inches in breadth ; the back is very high, and the shell of a very hard bony substance, consisting of many regular compartments, united by sutures, in the manner of the other species of tortoise, and covered with thin horny plates. The nether or belly shell is large, and regularly divided transversely into five parts : these compartments are not knit together like the sutures of the skull, or the back shell of the tortoise, but adhere, or are connected together by a very ridgy horny cartilage, which serves as hinges for him to shut up his body within his shell at pleasure. The fore part of the belly shell towards its extremity is formed somewhat like a spade, extends forward near three inches, and is about an inch and a half in breadth ; its extremity is a little bifid; the posterior division of the belly shell, is likewise protended backwards considerably, and is deeply bifurcated.



Magazin
für
den neuesten Zustand
der
Naturkunde.

XII. Bandes 5. Stück. November 1806.

I.

Beiträge zur Naturbeschreibung der Eulen.

(Vom Hrn. C. M. Nitzsch in Wittenberg.)

Die Bildung dieses nächtlichen Geflügels kündigt sich zwar äußerlich durch einen ganz eigenthümlichen Totaleindruck sogleich unverkennbar an, aber demungeachtet fehlt es den Kennzeichen, welche die Systematiker bisher als charakteristisch von derselben aufgestellt haben, theils an der nöthigen Allgemeingültigkeit und Richtigkeit, theils an der schneidenden Bestimmtheit, welche sie haben müssen, um

Voigt's Mag. XII. B. 5. St. Novbr. 1806. Dd

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copirt worden. Ich habe nun ein lebendiges vor mir. Es kann sehr lange ohne Nahrung leben, das meinige hat nun in fünf Monaten nichts genossen. Noch besitze ich eine sehr merkwürdige Species von Schildkröten, die sich sehr wohl befindet und ein Bewohner von Georgia und Florida ist. Ich finde sie noch von keinem systematischen Naturforscher beschrieben, doch finden Sie einige Nachrichten davon in der Reisebeschreibung meines Freundes Bartram. In der Beschreibung, die ich davon mittheilen will, werde ich sie vielleicht Testudo Atlas nennen, und zwar wegen ihrer außerordentlichen Stärke, besonders im Tragen großer Gewichte auf ihrem Rücken. Ein solches zwölf bis funfzehn Pfund schweres Thier kann einen mittelmäßig starken Mann eine ziemliche Strecke auf seinem Rücken forttragen.

Fig. 3. *Magazin für den neuesten Zustand der Naturkunde.* Left: Title page (p. 397) of the November issue in which Barton's letter to Albers appeared. Right: Page 425 in Barton (1806a) with his discussion of *Testudo atlas* (see transcription and translation in text). Source: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München.

The legs and feet are covered with flat horny squamæ ; he seems to have no clefts in them or toes, but long flattish nails or talons, somewhat in [p. 183] resemblance to the nails of the human fingers, five on the fore feet ; the hind legs or feet appear as if truncated, or as stumps of feet, armed all round with sharp, flattish strong nails, the number undetermined or irregular ; the head is of a moderate size, the upper mandible a little hooked, the edges hard and sharp ; the eyes are large ; the nose picked ; the nostrils near together and very minute ; the general colour of the animal is a light ash or clay, and at a distance, unless it is in motion, any one would disregard or overlook it as a stone or an old stump. It is astonishing what a weight one of these creatures will bear ; it will easily carry any man standing on its back, on level ground. They form great and deep dens in the sand hills, casting out incredible quantities of earth. They are esteemed excellent food; the eggs are larger than a musket ball, perfectly round, and the shell hard."

Bartram's (1791) description of *Testudo polyphaemus* is certainly adequate to unambiguously identify the species, however, Opinion 447 of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (Anonymous 1957) ruled that the *Travels*, including also the 1792 editions published in London and Dublin, should be rejected for nomenclatorial purposes because the work was not consistent in its application of binominal nomenclature. *Testudo polyphaemus* was the only binominal herpetological name coined by Bartram (1791) and although Harper (1940) made a case for attribution of the nomen to Bartram, even prior to the Commission's ruling, most herpetological literature credited the nomen *T. polyphemus* to Daudin (1801) (Hobart M. Smith *in* Anonymous 1957). Daudin (1801) himself cited the first French translation of Bartram (1799) as his source for this species, but did not explicitly indicate that Bartram had employed the name *Testudo polyphemus*, attributing to him only the vernacular "Gopher."

Although Barton (1806a) provided little in the way of a definition or description of *Testudo atlas*, his reference to Bartram (1791) clearly satisfies the requirements of the International *Code of Zoological Nomenclature* (Anonymous 1999), henceforth the *Code*. Specifically, Article 12.1 applies: "To be available, every new name published before 1931 must satisfy the provisions of Article 11 and must be accompanied by a description or a definition of the taxon that it denotes, or by an indication," with an indication including "a bibliographic reference to a previously published description or definition even if the description or definition is contained in a work published before 1758, or that is not consistently binominal, or that has been suppressed by the Commission"

Fig. 4. Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*): Irwin County, Georgia. Photo by Dirk J. Stevenson.

(Article 12.2.1). Although Barton (1806a) proposed the name in a conditional way, saying that he may use this name in a forthcoming description, which never appeared, this does not exclude it from availability (Art. 11.5.1). Thus, the nomen *Testudo atlas* is available from this publication. It is, however, clearly a junior synonym of *Testudo polyphemus* Daudin, 1801 and, thus, does not pose a threat to the stability of this well-known American chelonian.

Testudo atlas Barton, 1806 has not been mentioned in any published synonymies of *Gopherus polyphemus* (Mertens and Wermuth 1955; Wermuth and Mertens 1961, 1977, 1996; Auffenberg 1974; Auffenberg and Franz 1978; Fritz and Havaš 2007; TTWG 2021) nor is it listed in Sherborn's *Index Animalium* (1923). Neither is Barton's letter to Albers noted in nomenclatural histories treating *Gopherus polyphemus* (Crumly 1988; Murphy 2014) or included in bibliographies of the Gopher Tortoise (Douglass 1975, 1977; Gopher Tortoise Council 2023) or of Barton's writings (Barton 1836; Ewan and Ewan 2007). Indeed, the only reference to Barton (1806a) I could locate was in Mearns (1914), which referred to another part of the letter dealing with pocket gophers and made no mention of the tortoise.

The nomen *Testudo atlas* has, however, been used for the largest tortoise that ever lived (Fig. 5), a giant (180–210 cm carapace length) from the Late Pliocene to Early Pleistocene of the Siwalik Hills (see Kumar et al. 2020 for justification of this spelling of this geonym), Punjab, India (Lydekker 1889; TEWG 2015). The tortoise was first mentioned by Falconer and Cautley (1837:358) as *Megalochelys Sivalensis*. However, this use had been considered by TEWG (2015) to constitute a nomen nudum, that was subsequently only made available by Falconer in Murchison (1868:359). By this time though, Falconer and Cautley (1844) had employed the nomen *Colossochelys atlas* for the same species in a description that has been uniformly accepted as validly described. Most recently, however, Vlachos (2019) argued that *Megalochelys Sivalensis* Falconer and Cautley, 1837 is, indeed, *Code*-compliant and not a nomen nudum after all. Both specific epithets have been in regular use, with *sivalensis* also employed by Williams (1952), Lapparent de Broin (2002), Karl and Staesche (2007) [as *siwalensis*], Setiyabudi (2009), and Claude et al. (2011) and *atlas* by Hooijer (1971) and Auffenberg (1974).

As *atlas*, the species has been assigned variously to *Megalochelys* and *Colossochelys*, either as full genera, or as subgenera of *Geochelone* (e.g., Auffenberg 1974) or *Testudo* (e.g., Williams 1952) in the combinations *Testudo* (*Colossochelys*) *atlas* (Lydekker 1880), *Testudo*

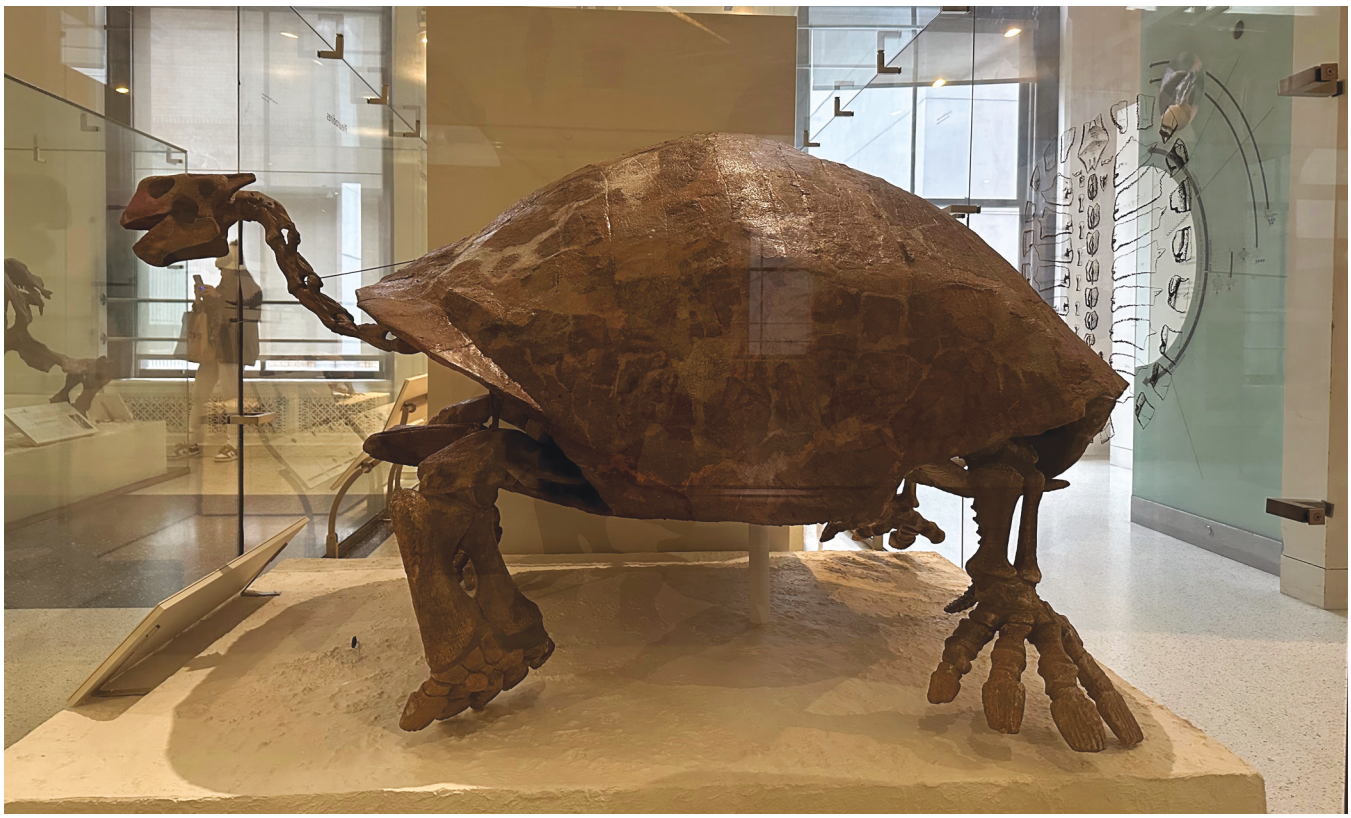

Fig. 5. *Megalochelys atlas* (= *M. sivalensis*). Specimen AMNH 6332 on display at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Weinell.

(*Megalochelys*) *atlas* (Lydekker 1889), *Testudo atlas* (Brown 1931) and *Geochelone atlas* (Hooijer 1971). Although these combinations would represent junior secondary homonyms of *Testudo atlas* Barton, 1806 (subgeneric names are irrelevant to the homonymy; *Code* Article 57.4), the current assignment of the giant Siwalik tortoise to the genus *Megalochelys* (e.g., TEWG 2015; Vlachos 2019) resolves this issue and based on Article 59.2 of the *Code* (Anonymous 1999), because these names are not currently allocated to the same genus, no action is required.

Recently, Frétey and Raffaëlli (2021) rediscovered another long-forgotten and rarely cited nomen that had been proposed by Benjamin Smith Barton, *Salamandra horrida* Barton,1807. They determined that *C. horridus* (Barton, 1807) is the valid name of the type species of *Cryptobranchus* Leuckart, 1821 and that it is applicable to the Ohio/Allegheny/Susquehanna lineage of hellbender (Hime 2017). Another Barton name, *Mus Tuza*, a pocket gopher described in another letter (Barton 1806b) published in the same volume of *Magazin für den neuesten Zustand der Naturkunde* as *Testudo atlas* has engendered a good deal of controversy (Mearns 1914; Harper 1952). Modern workers appear to follow Harper (1952) in regarding Barton's name as a nomen dubium or as unavailable for unspecified reasons (Álvarez-Castañeda and Segura-Trujillo 2025), although this remains open to interpretation. Admittedly, the case of *Testudo atlas* Barton, 1806 is more of a historical footnote than an actual problem for tortoise nomenclature, but it illustrates the fact that forgotten names still lurk in the literature and have the potential to disrupt current name usage. Barton's far-flung network of correspondents exacerbates the matter, as his letters were published in outlets all over the world (Ewan and Ewan 2007) and additional descriptions may well have gone unnoted.

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